

Effective Advocacy – At Speed, Under Pressure

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As the November 2017 Special Session of the Montana Legislature (the 8th special session in which I have lobbied since 1993) finished early this morning, I couldn't help but think how important it is to handle the increased speed and pressure implicit in the shortened time and increased urgency that comes with any special session.

In coaching soccer, I have had a large number of players who were, when we were standing around before or after a game, amazingly accomplished with the ball, endlessly juggling in place, placing 40 yard shots in just the right corner of the goal, and perfectly trapping 50 yard punted balls at their feet. Inevitably, however, the number of players able to handle these same challenges during *any* game, much less an important one, plunged to no more than 3-4 out of the 11 on the field. I always considered myself fortunate as a coach if I had one of these players on each line (forward, mid, back, keeper) in a season. Over the years, I came to understand that the degree of any team's success was almost always a function of the team's ability to be at their best when "at speed, under pressure."

These principles apply equally, or even more so, to effective advocacy and I am proud to have come out of this session as part of a successful team of advocates (including our own staff and the executive staff of MASBO, MEA-MFT, MQEC, MREA, and SAM) who handled themselves very well "at speed, under pressure."

Completely at odds with the temptation to fly by the seat of one's pants in this kind of an environment, or even just sit on the sidelines and passively observe, the advocates who partner under the banner of the Montana Public Education Center (MT-PEC) effectively engaged in crafting a solution in advance of this session, thereby preempting the discussion of more harmful proposals that were gathering steam. We ultimately crafted and passed a proposal in SB 2 that minimized the harm that would have otherwise happened to Montana's public schools. In short, we remained steadfast, focused and united by our shared interests in the best interests of Montana's public schools.

Leading up to the Session:

As the inevitability of a special session became clear over the past months, we started to hear of a variety of bad and harmful ideas regarding K-12 public education (e.g. cannibalizing different elements of the formula in line with the temporary elimination of the data for achievement payment, doubling the decrement to decrease funding for large school districts, cutting the entry level basic entitlements). A common narrative was feeding the emerging support for these proposals: "Schools have not suffered as much as the rest of government funded by the state general fund" or "K-12 schools have been exempt from the Governor's cuts and with one-third of the state general fund going to K-12, we have to look to K-12 for a part of this solution." Right or wrong, this narrative was being discussed in both parties.

One particular proposal that kept coming up and seemed to be gathering steam was a freeze on inflation in FY19, with an anticipated savings of \$14 million in state funds. We recognized that this cut in state funding would unleash an additional and permanent reduction of another \$7 million or so in local authority. With an anticipated required reduction in current spending for our members at over \$22 million, we knew we had to act.

Our Work on Senate Bill 2:

Our mutual support and work on Senate Bill 2 was not borne out of anything other than necessity, in order to preempt these more harmful proposals before they could become part of the session. With the session having adjourned earlier today without passage of any freeze in inflation or any of the other numerous attacks on the school funding formula that were under discussion before the session began, we succeeded.

As for MTSBA's part in these efforts, we were uniquely benefitted and guided by several member-approved and/or MTSBA Board-directed benchmarks in our work.

Both our Board-Adopted Core Values (Advocacy focused on the interests of children; Local Control by Elected School Boards; Alignment between funding and standards) and our Member-Adopted Principles and Guidelines (Principle I: Advocate for funding necessary to comply with the definition of quality in 20-9-309; Principle II: Advocate for preservation of local decision-making; Principle III: Pursuit of adequate and equitable funding so that school boards can provide programs and services for kids) provided us valuable guidance in crafting Senate Bill 2 and opposing other more harmful proposals.

At Speed, Under Pressure:

The most important source of our collective success was our ability to work "at speed, under pressure." Our detailed knowledge of every element of the funding formula and each line item affecting funding of schools helped us focus in on the least harmful proposal that would still meet the fiscal objectives of the state. This allowed us to reach an advance agreement with the Governor that limited the K-12 scope of the special session to our proposal. This knowledge also helped us quickly discern the meaning of other bills, funding line items and amendments that were being introduced, heard, and acted upon over the course of hours and in some cases even minutes. Our knowledge of the use of urgency, late nights and early mornings to gain advantage in a special session helped us in both advocating for our members' interests and preventing significant harm.

In some ways, this special session was a lot like nearly every other special session in which I have worked over the years. Special Sessions by their very nature do not come during the good times but when times are tough and when the interests of schools are at risk. What was different this time was the unity and shared purpose among all education advocacy groups, which allowed us to work as a team, each player at their best "at speed, under pressure."